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"REAL LIFE."

HELEN WODEHOUSE.

"Brought up in considerable luxury, sent to a first-class public school, at the age of eighteen the young man had been thrown upon his own resources by a rascally solicitor who was also his guardian. Without any trade or profession, he had known what it was to go through the bitterest depths of poverty in London. . . . He saw himself again within measurable distance of the old and dreadful privations. . . . 'Oh for a chance!' Charlie murmured to himself. . . . 'Oh for a chance to get out of all this, to live, to rise from the mud into some sphere of life which is real and actual, where things go on and where a fellow can have a chance.'"

(RANGER GULL: *The Ravenscroft Horror*.)

IT is unusual to imply that one's present life need not be "actual," and I do not know what professional philosophers could make of it. But the claim that a certain life is not "real" is common enough. Where we contrast real blankly with unreal the professional philosopher may still hesitate, but to distinguish degrees of reality is respectable even for him, and the popular philosopher would usually be willing to accept this version if he knew of it. I wish to examine the ideas which may guide us when we judge, "This, and not that, is specially real."

One kind of life is real because "things go on and a fellow can have a chance." We are testing it by fulness of content,—that is more real which has more in it. Charlie desires to get out of poverty in order "to live"; a girl wants to leave home "to see life." They say of the old restricted ways, "This is not living."

Sometimes we are thinking chiefly of the chance to express more of our self. In our present position we may be confined too closely to one bit of it (though no position could enable us to live simultaneously throughout the whole of our potential nature; we could not use all our muscles at once or wear all our clothes). Or habit may restrict us more closely than our circumstances do. We get into the way of living in one small part of our personality

and being there we may seem to live very frankly and sincerely, because we are acting spontaneously from a few selected ideas and sentiments.¹ The effect may come from middle-aged custom or from youthful inexperience, as when we say of a youth that he "has not found himself yet," and therefore is not living his real life.

Sometimes "more in it" refers to emotional vividness. "I want to live" may express a need for excitement or adventure or bodily pleasures, or for the experience of love. When we are very sleepy, or when our nerves are numb from a shock or exhausted from overstrain, or in certain kinds of insanity, the whole world seems unreal to us because it cannot make us feel. Or sometimes it is not exactly emotion but personal interest that makes life real, the unreal is what bores us. A young teacher who had given up teaching for settlement work told me enthusiastically that this was living, while teaching little girls was not. As she afterwards turned with still greater enthusiasm to take up mechanical dentistry, I cannot bring her distinction under any other rule.

Like every other clue to reality, this fulness may be carelessly interpreted. Experience, for instance, may be sought in yielding to impulse and never in guiding or controlling it. And here we may find ourselves passing over into using a different test;—one which we shall find lying on the borders of each idea in turn, a temptation which recurs continually in professional as in amateur philosophy,—the belief that the real consists of the primitive, the unworked; what would be if nothing had superseded it. Thus the life of impulse, or of sensuality, or again the life of an explorer or pioneer, may be taken to be "life" in an exemplary degree first because it is interesting or emotionally exciting (or is thought to be so), and then because it is "natural." Perhaps the two ideas are combined by the people who say that the war introduced us to the realities of life; though these people may also have another kind of

¹ A remark of Paulhan's, in *Les Mensonges Conventionnelles*.

fulness in mind,—the muchness of a thing that crashes into our world; of something that we cannot cope with.

The test of primitive naturalness, of course, will quickly go wrong if we forget our historical knowledge. The life of the sensualist and the life of the modern soldier have both been shaped by an elaborate society with a very long history. No animal has anything like either of them.

2.

When professional philosophers speak of degrees of reality, fulness of content is one of the tests which they offer, and the test paired with it usually "harmony." That is more truly real which is more harmonious internally and in better agreement with all around. In matters of knowledge and opinion we all use this test. What contradicts itself cannot as such be real, and what contradicts its context shows unreality somewhere. In matters of living the professional philosopher uses it, and the amateur sometimes tries to use it, but I believe he finds it difficult and elusive. It turns quickly into other tests in his hands.

Anything that simplifies life and opinion may appear specially real. In this respect also to many persons the war seemed to bring reality, because it swept away division of mind and hesitation over what should be thought or done. Tangles and divisions within ourselves disturb us. Paulhan in *Les Mensonges Conventionnelles* describes what he calls the lie in the will. "To will is to affirm as real an act or a state of the self which is not real yet, but is to become so." "The essential falsehood of will consists in putting aside and denying the ideas and sentiments which resist the decision; in acting as if they did not exist!" "Morality commands simulation when she enjoins acts in accordance with the moral ideal which has not yet become part of our personality." (Pp. 112, 131.) Now this resolves itself easily into that other test, "the real is the primitive and the unworked." Finding a disharmony in ourselves, we correct it most readily by sacrificing our latest acquisitions. Thus people speak of "the nature coming through," or they

beg a self-controlled person to be his "real self" for a moment, though they do not mean to accuse him of hypocrisy.

Another way of applying the harmony-test is different outwardly but not very different in theory,—the ascetic's way. We seek inward harmony through simplification and the extinction of desires; cutting down more and more. Thus by a different approach we come again to exalting the "natural" life of the pioneer or the peasant.

3.

Just now we spoke of begging a person to be his real self "for a moment" or "for once." But in another sense this is impossible, for his most real self is his *representative* self: what he usually is; what we may expect to find him. Similarly it is on the typical or model member of a species that we model our idea of the specific nature. "You're not a real boy," we say, "if you don't like climbing." The poor man's life is more real than the rich man's because most men are poor. Judge Brack denies Hedda Gabler's suicide, with the sound of the shot still in his ears, because "people don't do these things."

This test by representativeness might be explained as a simple kind of harmony-test, in fact as its easiest application. That life is most real which conforms to most of our experience. Or we might take it as a special way of finding fulness and significance. "A man's common life," we might claim, "expresses most of his real self, and the life of humanity expresses most of human nature." "This ordinary person, the plain man, is the most real Englishman."

Clearly we may be misled by this. Is it in the average man of the time, or in Plato and Pheidias, that we are to look for the most real spirit of Greece? Muchness in space and time will be no fair substitute for the idea. Yet the test may often give good sense enough. To decide whether a man is really a fine fellow, we may fairly ask how often he has behaved as such in the last fifteen years. And we rightly feel significance and richness in experiences which are common to ordinary human beings.

4.

The real, we have been saying, is the representative, the typical. Instead of taking this as a kind of fulness or a kind of harmony, we may take it as one form of a third test, the test of *position*.

Obviously the representative term of a series has a special position in that series. It is the mode, or the median, or the average; it stands in the middle. But we can go deeper than this. The life that is really representative is "full" and "harmonious" because it is full of the main current of the general life and in harmony with the motion of that main current; it is not a waning pool or a backwater. Or, to change the metaphor, the truly representative is the *structural*. Love and motherhood and manual labour are common to so many millions because they belong to the main frame of life and bear up everything else. The craving for love to make life real is not merely desire for emotion to fill up emptiness, or for satisfaction to appease disharmony, nor is it merely the wish to be like other people. It is the craving to belong to other people; to be necessary; to feel oneself part of a whole.

5.

We can find many examples of the test of reality by position with or without its deepening into the idea of structure. Of two conflicting opinions, for instance, we often say that the truth will probably lie in the middle. The phrase is a bad one, since it makes both opinions merely false, and substitutes a third on the same level. "There is some truth on both sides" is harder to picture but better in idea. What we need is the structural notion. Truth ought to be found on a different plane, beneath the errors or above them, in such a position that it will show us how each opinion grew, and what of reality is revealed in each.

Sometimes the idea of structure is evident at once, and then it is important but may be badly managed. We find it in the commonest phrases of realist policy, where real life is "working the machine," or "pulling the wires," or

"knowing the ropes." We have to ask here, How big and how deep a portion of reality have we got hold of? With all its wires, was the old diplomacy "in touch with reality?" and how much of the real history of Europe is given by the history of its *Realpolitik*? We may sympathise with the politicians when we remember how hard it is in our private lives to cope with the subtleties of "what is practical," and to know what is coming to something and what is not. An ingenious sermon on the text "He hangeth the world upon nothing" describes a man who has boasted all his life of knowing the ropes, and who finds in the end that there are no ropes.² And Newman's epitaph pictures him turning forever from the practical politics of Rome and England *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*.

We must notice in passing one very important use of the structural-position test, in the distinguishing of *imagination* from reality. Imagined objects may be full of light and colour, but they stand by themselves, isolated from the physical universe; and imaginative feeling and impulse is similarly isolated in our self, not forming part of the main current which leads up to action in the physical world. But this subject belongs to technical rather than to popular philosophy.

So far we have spoken only incidentally of reality as opposed to pretence. Let us turn to this now: "These pearls are not real," we say, meaning not that they are a hallucination, but that they are not something which they claim to be.

6.

One of the most important ways of being unreal is that of the sentimentalists, of whom the classical analysis is contained in Bosanquet's essay on "Right and Wrong in Feeling."³ "The sentimentalist has his interest, not in the significance of an idea or perception, but in that excitement of feeling which the idea has power to arouse in him. . . .

² Watkinson: *Unfamiliar Texts*.

³ In the *Civilization of Christendom*.

To feel for the pleasure of feeling . . . is the note of sentimentalism." "In the strictest moral sense the sentimentalist is always an impostor, because he himself and not his ostensible object is always the centre of his feeling. The frauds of sentimentalism are simply the climax of a mental state which is fraudulent through and through." Fancy-feelings make a convenient field for this voluptuousness. The pressure on us to abuse them is greatest in the unsatisfied times of youth, when our instincts are awake yet unfulfilled, when we are solitary and not self-sufficient, shy and awkward and helpless yet not humble. The sentimentalist need not include himself among his objects, but to do so gives him another convenient and interesting field. We can look at our self sentimentally or voluptuously, with feeling which is "not the direct reaction to the object" but "an echo artificially sustained for the pleasure of the sound." Such looking differs from true self-observation because its aim is pleasant experience and not the discovery of truth. We are not necessarily trying to deceive ourselves, but neither are we trying to enlighten ourselves;—we are merely indifferent to any facts which do not yield us the feeling we want. Thus it is a far easier business than real self-observation. This greater ease has an odd little result, for the sentimentalist tends to feel that the voluptuous way of seeing himself is the only possible way, and that to renounce it would be to blindfold his inward eye.

Voluptuous self-contemplation is often reinforced by the thought of an audience, sometimes quite vague and sometimes including known persons. If we are comfortably self-absorbed and unperceptive we may find it quite possible to use the persons actually present for our imaginary audience. This is common in the "showing-off" by young children, and my own memories make me believe that psychologists seldom allow enough for this disposition between three and eight years old. Children's unperceptiveness is intermittent, however, with intervals that are painful to recall.

Sometimes it is hard to decide whether we have the fraud of sentimentalism or only imagination and dramatising of the clean kind. Here, for instance, is a puzzling little passage from Mrs. Bryant's *Teaching of Morality*,⁴ "The lesson on character goes home of its own accord when the self-consciousness of the learner . . . awakens to appropriate the idea of that sort of person . . . the child feels that he would like to act and *to feel himself acting like*, for example, the brave heroes of Thermopylæ . . . to feel himself like one of them. The emotional glow which accompanies this idea of self as so and so, transmutes the bare idea into a practical aspiration to do likewise." As this stands I think it harmful. All that Mrs. Bryant needed, I believe, was that the pupil should enter into the feelings of the persons described, and should feel emotion in thinking of such persons. The child glows over the heroes and feels that he would like to share their life,—their acts and feelings. Unless he is a sentimentalising child, he will not proceed to the complication of feeling-that-he-would-like-to-feel-himself-doing this.

Here again are some interesting and difficult passages from the essay on "A sense of the Dramatic," in *A Student In Arms*.

"By 'a sense of the dramatic' I mean, getting outside yourself and seeing yourself and other people as the characters of a story. . . . You see the romance in your own life. . . . If you have a sense of the dramatic . . . you will understand the romance of being an uncle. You will disburse your largesse with an air of genial patronage and *bonhomie* which will endear you to the boy forever. You will go away feeling that you have both been a huge success in your respective parts. The artist will see himself, not as the hero of the story, but as one of the characters. . . . The soldier sees himself, not as an individual hero, but as a loyal follower, who is content to endure all and to brave all under a trusted captain. . . . The most perfect form of Christianity is just the abiding sense of loyalty to a divine Master—the abiding sense of the dramatic which never loses sight of the Master's figure and which continually enables a man to see himself in the rôle of the trusted and faithful disciple, so that he is always trying to live up to his part."

⁴ P. 38.

I think that Mr. Hankey is confusing when, like Mrs. Bryant, he lays such emphasis on *seeing oneself* in the rôle that one is trying to play. During the stress of working, surely, the object contemplated will be simply the rôle-to-be-filled. I believe there is a confusion in psychology here, which we might correct with little harm to the essay. But beyond this, I believe that the writer does not fully realise how easy it is to slip into getting your drama cheap. Again, "the artist will see himself, not as the hero of the story, but as one of the characters." If one is looking at oneself, with a romantic motive, I believe it takes an unusual simplicity and modesty (like Mr. Hankey's own) to keep these relative positions. If one does not actually slip into the centre, it is still hard for most of us not to see ourself as a rather sympathetic character. A little tampering is so easy when we contemplate for any other purpose than scientific truth; and the whole point of the ancient and honourable image of the moral drama is that we must not tamper with the rôle. "Thine it is to act well the part that is allotted to thee;—to choose it is another's."

Possibly during the last century we have become more suspicious of even a distant approach to cheap drama or sentimental self-appreciation. It would be impossible for a modern writer to give, except ironically, some of the excellent descriptions which Adam Smith seems to give in good faith. "That moderated sensibility to the suffering of others . . . which does not disqualify us for the performance of any duty . . . the melancholy and affectionate remembrance of our departed friends—the pang, as Gray says, *to secret sorrow dear*—are by no means undelicious sensations. Though they outwardly wear the features of pain and grief, they are all inwardly stamped with the ennobling characters of virtue and self-approbation."⁵ The psychology is indisputable, but one hardly sees now why the ennobling inward stamp should be endorsed by the ethical writer. "The friends of Socrates all wept when he

⁵ *Moral Sentiments*, Part 3, Ch. 3.

drank the last potion, while he himself expressed the gayest and most cheerful tranquility. Upon all such occasions the spectator makes no effort, and has no occasion to make any, in order to conquer his sympathetic sorrow. He is under no fear that it will transport him to anything that is extravagant and improper; he is rather pleased with the sensibility of his own heart, and gives way to it with complaisance and self-approbation. He gladly indulges, therefore, the most melancholy views which can naturally occur to him concerning the calamity of his friend, for whom, perhaps, he never felt so exquisitely before the tender and tearful passion of love. But it is quite otherwise with the person principally concerned.”⁶

7.

When we suspect fraudulence in ourselves or others,—whether it is the divided attention of the sentimentalist, or the woolliness of irrelevance or fluency, or the hollowness of merely conventional assumptions or principles,—our impulse is to counter it by severe practical tests. We want to press the point: to penetrate the armour; to “give him something to attend to”; to break through or to break down. We come suddenly back to the formula “reality is what lies beneath”; “it is what remains when you break down all you can.” Now this means that we sometimes actually go counter to our other tests of representativeness and harmony. We take a kind of disharmony and untypicalness to characterise the most real self. Here, we say, we have the bed-rock; the last resort. Almost perversely sometimes we refuse to be sure that the man has really been living at his full depth, beyond all convention or assumption, until this disharmony has appeared. From Aristotle’s magnanimous man we react to the testing of Plato’s saint. We hesitate perhaps even over the beautiful description of the Happy Warrior, who

“while the mortal mist is gathering, draws
His breath in confidence of heaven’s applause.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, Part 1, Section 3, Ch. 1.

It contrasts too directly with the cry through the mist, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

This demand for "rock-bottom" has its own dangers, as have all the other tests of reality. In the first place, we ought to distinguish between pain and behaviour towards pain. Mere suffering is no more sufficient than mere happiness to make a man real; at the best it can only dig down to a bit of personality which is not big enough to be called a self, and which will be covered again the moment that the grinding point is removed. Therefore R. H. Benson gives an absurd solution of a well-set problem in *The Sentimentalists*, when he supposes his fraudulent hero made genuine by mere persecution, with no moral reaction implied. In the second place, we cannot test the whole round of character by any one means;—the trial which presses in one part will not press in another. "After I had been shut up for four months in a siege, daily exposed to shells, bullets, fever and starvation, I felt no relief when the relief came, but rather a dread of confronting the perils of ordinary life."⁷ In the third place, to seek reality only in extremity is like seeking the thing in itself by stripping off all its qualities. We have to grow to become our real selves, rather than to cut down.

Perhaps this gives us the clue. "Pressure" and "bed-rock" are wrong words; what we want is the man's full stretch, his reach and grasp, his utmost. Not only in trials but in every kind of experience (and every kind is needed), our reality is found in the most that we can do. In fact the unreality in our life and in ourselves is best looked on, not as an artificial building-on, but as a coming short. Whether it shows itself as inadequacy or as disharmony, or as unrelatedness, or as any kind of falsity, it is the easy way and cheap buying. "Real life" takes all our lives.

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⁷ H. W. Nevinston, *Essays in Rebellion*, p. 20.